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Echoes of the U2

The Central Intelligence Agency has quietly announced that Francis Gary Powers, the U2 pilot who was shot down over Russia May 1, 1960, resigned from its service because "his work is finished."

It is a work which Powers probably wishes never began since he was the principal figure in an embarrassing chapter of the CIA's shadowy history that exposed the United States in a deliberate, cover-up lie, and provided Premier Khrushchev with a handy excuse to kill a summit conference he did not welcome.

Powers was shot down on a photographic mission and tried as a spy by the Russians in a court scene staged to yield the ultimate in propaganda. He was convicted and then exchanged last February for a key Soviet spy.

Was Powers a hero or coward? Many people insist he should have used the poison needle packed in his escape kit and blown up the ship as he bailed out. This would have allowed this country to disavow his existence, the traditional espionage plot. Others argue he was not instructed to commit suicide, that he was not a professional spy, but rather a highly skilled technician guiding a spy plane. Therefore, the argument goes, the customary spy behavior did not apply.

After his release, the CIA stated Powers had fulfilled his contract and lived up to "his obligations as an American under the circumstances in which he found himself." In the book, "The U2 Affair," reporters David Wise and Thomas H. Ross concluded that Powers was an ordinary man on an extraordinary mission.

If Powers were only a technician and not

a spy as most believe, his primary usefulness ended when he bailed out over Russia. Any residue was exhausted with his questioning by the CIA on his return home. This was indicated when the CIA gave him a job of undisclosed duties which did not include flying.

So it appears the real hero in this spy venture was the U2. As Francis Gary Powers was slipping back into anonymity, which he should welcome, the plane returned to prominence by giving the United States the first firm evidence of the Soviet buildup of offensive weapons in Cuba. Now it daily sweeps over that troubled island and reports on the Russian "build-down."

Perhaps Powers' reflections on this bit of irony in which a machine comes out the champion may be discussed in the book which it is reported he intends to write.

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